

IS THERE A TV IN MY HEAD?: CONTENT, FUNCTIONAL MAPPING, AND THE MYTH OF THE GIVEN

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ABSTRACT: Just what are we talking about when we talk about the *content* of perception? There are a number of different questions which are often asked about the precise nature of this content, such as to what extent it is *representational*, and to what extent this representation is *conceptual* in character.¹ However, these questions usually gloss over what it is to talk about perceptual content *qua* content, in their haste to talk about it *qua* representation or conception. On this basis, it is all too tempting to account for not only the specific character of the content, but also how it is individuated, in *phenomenological* terms.² This is to say that perceptual content is understood as whatever is contained within an *introspective domain* to which we have some sort of special access. Wilfrid Sellars' attack on the myth of the given has provided us with good reason to doubt the epistemic authority such special access to our inner states purportedly provides, and thus to doubt the efficacy of any account of perceptual content that gives introspection such a fundamental role.³ This is his critique of what Jim O'Shea has called the *epistemic given*.⁴ However, there is a further side to the myth that Sellars critiques, which O'Shea calls the *categorical given*. The aim of the present paper is to articulate and explain the

¹ I am here lumping together a number of different though overlapping debates the terminology of which diverges in various ways. I do not wish to give a complete taxonomy and genealogy of the phrases 'mental content', 'phenomenal content', and 'sensory content' within the literature and the various degrees to which they have (or haven't adequately) been distinguished. However, it is worth noting that there is a distinct thread of debate that reserves the word 'content' for cases of representation (cf. Susanna Siegel, 'The Contents of Perception', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Jul 19 2010, accessed Oct 10, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/perception-contents/>). The question is then whether the 'phenomenal character' of perception constitutes a form of representational content, and the extent to which this is conceptual or otherwise.

² The reference to 'phenomenology' here is meant to include both those loose discussions of what perceptual experience 'is like' that have proliferated in the analytic philosophy of perception and the more methodologically defined introspective study of consciousness that derives from Husserl's work.

³ This is most famously presented in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind' in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing, 1963), pp. 127-196. Hereafter *EPM*.

⁴ James R. O'Shea, *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), ch. 5.

latter by building upon Sellars' critique of the former and the account of perception that ensues from it. This involves demonstrating some constraints governing accounts of perceptual content on the basis of the explanatory demands placed upon them as accounts of perception on the one hand, and the explanatory resources available to them as accounts of content on the other. The result will be an account of the myth of the categorial given that explains both why it is tempting and why we must resist this temptation.

KEY WORDS: Content of perception, myth of the given, Sellars, categories.

1. Perception and Explanation

To begin with the explanatory demands, it seems to me that there are two distinct explanatory enterprises that any account of perceptual content must contribute to. On the one hand, there is the *epistemological* enterprise of explaining the general role that perception can play in empirical justification independently of variations in the causal structure of perceiving agents. This means telling a story about how the sensory inputs fed into a causal system can gain the normative significance of warranting moves within the space of reasons, in a way that could apply not only to different human beings, but to stranger creatures such as aliens or artificial intelligences whose sensory capacities and overall causal economy diverge radically from our own. On the other hand, there is the *psychological* enterprise of explaining the specific role that perception plays in the causal economy of particular perceiving agents. This means telling a story about how the sensory inputs fed into a causal system contribute to the production of *behavioural outputs*, in such a way as to give us predictive purchase upon the behaviour of creatures with particular types of causal structure.

Although these enterprises are distinct, they are also importantly intertwined. Any epistemology that cannot account for the way differences in the causal structure of our sensory capacities can affect their role in empirical justification will have failed to get a grip on the causal dimension of perception, or its connection to *sensation*, and any psychology that cannot account for the way perception can supply us with reasons that cause us to act one way rather than another will have failed to get a grip on the normative dimension of perception, or its connection to *rational agency*. We only have an account of perception, be it epistemological or psychological, when its causal and normative dimensions are properly connected. Any account of perceptual content as something that plays a role in both epistemological and psychological explanations must couch it in terms amenable to both of these dimensions. The first insight that we can take from Sellars here is that the proper interface between these two dimensions is the use of *functional explanation* in empirical psychology. To use a phrase he is fond of – we must understand perceptual content in terms of the way it fits into the ‘wiring diagram’ of the perceiver.⁵

Causal explanation in general works by applying *explanatory schemas* to systems that facilitate the development of *predictions* about the way that they would behave under various possible conditions. These schemas provide us with more or less general ways of organising *counterfactual reasoning* about these possibilities, thereby enabling

⁵ Wilfrid Sellars, ‘Being and Being Known’, in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing, 1963), pp. 41-59, §37. Hereafter *BBK*.

us to draw specific conclusions about how they would behave in any given set of circumstances.⁶ A *functional schema* enables us to develop predictions by treating a system on analogy with *practical reasoning*. For instance, by allowing us to treat its *parts* as *means* in relation to the *whole* as an *end*. This lets us describe the causal role of the systems' components in terms of *success* and *failure*, and thereby to organise our counterfactual reasoning about the causal relations between them in terms of the way failure cascades throughout the system.⁷ The explanatory power of a functional schema thus lies precisely in its introduction of the possibility of *malfunction*. It is the fact that this is an essentially normative notion which enables functional explanation to connect the epistemological and psychological dimensions of perception.

It remains to say something about the role of introspection in relation to these explanatory demands. One crucial consequence of Sellars' critique of the epistemic given is that introspection must be understood as a genuine species of perception, rather than *sui generis*.⁸ This means that whatever epistemic authority we possess in relation to the objects of introspection is *de facto* rather than *de jure*, insofar as they are potentially otherwise observable even if they are not in fact otherwise observed. It is because of this that there is no need for a distinct phenomenological enterprise of describing what perception 'is like', nor any good reason to think that our epistemological and psychological theories of perception should be beholden to it. This is not to say that introspection can play no role in the development of these theories, only that it plays no privileged role in the process of assessing them. Instead, the capacity for introspection and the associated language games involving 'looks', 'seems', and 'what it is like' are themselves to be accounted for by our epistemological and psychological theories insofar as they constitute a novel class of sensory inputs and behavioural outputs, which play a derivative role in the practice of empirical justification insofar as they enable us to *modulate* our observational claims (e.g., by introducing information about our propensities to assert claims about observables into empirical discourse while withdrawing commitment to those claims) and *calibrate* the perceptual capacities from which they ensue (e.g., by comparing, identifying, and adjusting our responses to features of my sensory system).

⁶ One way of cashing this out the idea of 'organisation' is to say that explanatory schemas provide us with methods of grouping beliefs about a system's circumstances that would, if true, act as defeasors for those material inferences that encode particular aspects of the system's behaviour. This is to say that they provide us with cognitively tractable ways of carving out ranges of *counterfactual robustness* for these inferences. The need for such tractable ways of sorting relevant from irrelevant information about causal systems (be they implicit practical abilities or more explicitly formalised methods) is discussed by Brandom in chapter 4 of *Between Saying and Doing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), hereafter *BSD*.

⁷ These cascade patterns neatly group defeasors in the manner noted in the previous footnote, thereby revealing the modal structure of the system's possibility space.

⁸ The consequences of this idea are initially presented by Sellars in his Myth of Jones (*EPM*, section XII), in which he dramatises the origin and conceptual development of perceptual capacities to introspect internal states.

2. Content and Explanation

Moving on to the explanatory resources, it strikes me that the purpose of the notion of content is to talk about how two seemingly *different* states of distinct systems (the *vehicles*) can nevertheless be the *same* in another sense (through sharing *content*). There's obviously a trivial sense in which this can be the case without warranting the ascription of content at all, such as the sense in which two houses may be in a state of disrepair, even while the precise nature and extent of their disrepair may differ. But to say that they both share a content here would be to say nothing more than that they share a *property*, and thus entirely redundant. This is not to say that states whose similarity consists in common properties cannot share content on that very basis. Two VHS tapes that share precisely the same magnetic properties will share precisely the same informational content. The question is how we can say that an information storage medium that works on different causal principles, such as a Betamax tape or a DVD could share the same content as the VHS tapes. I'm going to use this comparison with information storage media as the guiding analogy through which to think about the explanatory role of perceptual content. I think we should aim to think about what it would be for states of distinct perceiving subjects *qua* causal systems to have the same content, in much the way that states of distinct information storage devices can have the same content, before we address what it would be for this content to be perceptual, and in what sense this makes it representational and/or conceptual.

In order to extend the individuation of the content belonging to states of causal systems beyond mere similarity of properties, we must consider relations of *isomorphism* between them. This means breaking down states into the features of which they are composed and the relations between them, and then developing a way of *mapping* these to the features and relations that compose the corresponding states. This *mapping schema* (or *morphism*) allows us to count some feature of one state as equivalent to a feature of another despite differences in their properties, insofar as it occupies the same role within the system of relations that constitute it. We can then determine if two states share the same content on the basis of some sufficient degree of correspondence between their components. This would let us see a VHS and a Betamax tape as possessing the same content insofar as there is some way of mapping the magnetic properties of one to the other, despite the differences between these properties. However, the problem with such *pure isomorphism* is that it can be arbitrarily extended in ways that undermine any possible explanatory role it could have. We can potentially construct arbitrary mappings that pair the magnetic traces on the VHS tape with price patterns in the stock market, or pair the digital encoding of the DVD with a sequence taken from the binary expansion of pi. Insofar as it completely severs the individuation of content from any concern with the causal capacities of systems and their states, pure isomorphism precludes identity of content from playing any role in causal explanation.

We can avoid these problems of pure isomorphism by using the *functional roles* of the states and their components to constrain the mapping schema. In order for this to work the relevant states must be *variable* features of the wiring diagram of the system, and their variations must be functionally correlated with *variable outputs* of some sort. For example, the VHS tape contains a length of material whose electromagnetic properties vary in delimited ways, which will produce suitable variations in the patterns

of light emitted by a TV set to which it is appropriately connected.⁹ On this basis, it is possible to produce a *functional mapping* from the components of the one set of variable states to another in terms of *common outputs* to which they are functionally correlated. For example, we can produce a functional mapping from VHS to Betamax that maps their distinct variations in electromagnetic properties onto one another in terms of similarities in the patterns of light they engender when suitably connected to a TV set. In essence, we treat the states possessing content as isomorphic with one another insofar as their components can be mapped onto the same set of functional roles, which are themselves isomorphic with the output they are supposed to produce. It is this dependence upon a common output mechanism that allows functionally individuated content to play a useful role in causal explanation.

However, there are still questions regarding the fineness of grain of such isomorphisms. As an illustrative example, consider the way that the contents of a VHS tape can be copied from one tape to another. This process never reproduces the electromagnetic properties of the first tape exactly, with serial copying eventually introducing so much distortion as to completely eradicate the original pattern. There is thus a legitimate question as to where precisely in a series of copies the tapes cease to bare the same content as the original, or precisely how much variance the mapping relation will tolerate. Similar problems emerge if we consider intrinsic differences between storage mediums and formats, such as the difference between analog and digital encoding, or the difference between higher and lower resolution digital encoding. This suggests that there are many possible mapping relations corresponding to different sorts of fineness of grain, insofar as they permit different sorts of variance between the outputs to which the relevant component states are correlated. The lesson to learn from this is that individuating content can be more complicated than it initially seems, and that discussions of content often make appeals to implicit criteria for selecting mapping relations. There is nothing troubling about this per se, any more than there is about implicit restrictions on quantification in natural language. However, it should make us cautious about assuming that there is a natural way of individuating the contents of perception that we can easily appeal to to secure a common object of debate.

There are two final points to make about functional mapping. The first point is that we need not yet characterise content individuated this way as representational. It is all too tempting to say that the content represents the output that it is functionally correlated with. For instance, it can be tempting to suggest that two VHS tapes represent the same movie, or that two records represent the same piece of music.¹⁰ Here it is important to remember that 'movies' or 'pieces of music' are just as abstract as shared contents, and that their correct showing or performance is subject to their own additional norms. One might nevertheless think that content represents raw output, such as the patterns of light or sound with which the information storage media are correlated. However, we should resist the temptation to identify representation with mere functional correlation, as it

⁹ I am not the first to use an analogy with a TV set to try and elucidate elements of Sellars account of perception. Edmond Wright deploys the same analogy in trying to explain Sellars' account of sensory contents, or what he calls 'sensa' or 'raw feels' ('A Defence of Sellars', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Sept. 1985, Vol. XLVI, No. 1, pp. 73-90).

¹⁰ Sellars himself is guilty of claiming this at one point in *BBK* (§40).

arises principally because the analogical character of functional explanation invites us to treat the relevant states *as if* they were instructions for performing certain actions. The second point is that it gives us a way of talking about *form* as well as *content*. The ways in which the components of the relevant states can vary may be classified in terms of more general functional roles they play, and these classifications provide more or less abstract forms that correspond to the content of their specific variations. Put another way, form consists in the *functional invariants* that delimit the variations in which content consists. It is the structure of those elements of the wiring diagram in which the range of variation of the content bearing states are encoded.

3. Perception, Representation and Conception

We can now turn to considering which states of a causal system deserve to have something called perceptual content ascribed to them, and to what extent they are representational and/or conceptual. Here I am going to follow Sellars, who takes perception to be the transition from a causally efficacious sensory input to a normatively significant propositional output, or from *sensation* to *conception*. I'm also going to endorse his account of the nature of this conceptually articulated output, which is modelled upon the assertion of a declarative sentence.¹¹ For Sellars, conceptual content is primarily to be understood as the functional role that a sentence and its component expressions play in the language game of giving and asking for reasons. This is a linguistic practice composed by three distinct types of sentence-involving behaviour: *language-entry* transitions (perception), *intra-language* transitions (inference), and *language-departure* transitions (action).¹² Language-entry transitions are the result of behavioural dispositions to endorse sentences on the basis of non-linguistic sensory input (e.g., to assert 'it's raining' in response to the presence of rain) and language-departure transitions are similarly the result of behavioural dispositions to produce non-linguistic behavioural output on the basis of endorsed sentences (e.g., to use an umbrella given endorsement of 'it's raining', 'the rain will ruin my shirt', and 'I have an umbrella to hand'). Intra-language transitions (e.g., inferring 'the ground will be wet' from 'it's raining') may be counted as genuine *moves* in the game insofar as they can be performed in accordance with rules of inference (*ought-to-dos*) rather than merely assessed in accordance with functional norms governing the relevant dispositions (*ought-to-bes*). However, that each type of transition is subject to normative assessment of whatever

¹¹ The nature of the connection between language and thought presupposed by this methodological stance remains contentious. In his early work, Sellars restricts himself to discussing private thought episodes as derivative upon linguistic 'thinkings-out-loud' insofar as the former can be understood in terms of their functional role in producing the latter (cf. *BBK*, 'Some Reflections on Language Games' in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing, 1963), pp. 321-358. Hereafter *SRLG.*), but in his later work he attempts to account for the existence of private thought episodes (such as those belonging to non-linguistic animals) that have no such functional connection to linguistic expression ('Mental Events', *Philosophical Studies*, 1981, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp. 325-345.). However, others who have adopted the methodological stance of the early work have rejected this later move (Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), ch.3, §5). I will not endeavour to resolve this issue here.

¹² A more detailed presentation of these ideas can be found in *SRLG*.

kind is sufficient to provide sentences with a unified functional role within the overall economy of perception, inference, and action. Two sentences have the same content just insofar as they are properly involved in the same transitions, and two component expressions have the same content just insofar as their contribution to the roles of the sentences they compose is the same. Insofar as system states can derivatively possess conceptual content insofar as they are appropriately functionally connected to the possibility of producing linguistic behaviour, the sense in which the transition from a causal input to a conceptually contentful state counts as perceptual is to be understood in terms of the sense in which a language-entry move is perceptual. Finally, I'm going to take for granted that conceptual content is representational insofar as I agree with Sellars that it *signifies* things in the world, but I'm not going to go any further into the tortured question of how representation can be reconstructed out of inference here.¹³

On this basis, I think that anything worth the name perceptual content will be have to be possessed by states of the mechanisms involved in the whole process of moving from sensation to conception. Borrowing another term from Brandom, we could say that perceptual content must be possessed by some state of the *perceptual mechanism* underlying a rational agent's *reliable differential responsive dispositions* (RDRDs).¹⁴ However, there are potentially many candidates for this, insofar as there can be numerous subsystem states with variable functional outputs involved in the processing of sensory information into conceptual content. Restricting ourselves to our own visual systems for the moment, this can range from the pattern of activation on the back of the retina (Quine's infamous *stimulus meaning*),¹⁵ through neurological states of the various information processing systems in the visual cortex, to neurological states of a global system that integrates information from various sources and makes it available to other cognitive processes (such as Thomas Metzinger's *phenomenal world model*).¹⁶ Moreover, because content bearing states can compose into further states, it is equally possible to talk about combinations of any or all of these. There are multiple layers of information processing between sensation and conception any and all of which can be the subject of functional mappings insofar as they output to other layers or to the ultimate conceptually articulated product. This panoply of options should give us further reason for caution in assuming that there is a natural way of individuating perceptual content.

The question is now what it would be to say that any of these states possessed representational yet non-conceptual content. This is what Sellars calls *picturing* as opposed to signifying.¹⁷ The obvious thing to do here is to reach for the notion of isomorphism once more, and to say that content which is already individuated by functional mapping is representational just insofar as there is also an isomorphism

¹³ In *BBK* (section II), Sellars draws a distinction between two types of representation: *signification* and *picturing*. The former is unique to conceptually articulated representations of language users, whereas the latter is common to the sorts of environmental mapping and signalling that we share with non-linguistic animals. We will say more about the latter notion below, but it is worthwhile noting that Brandom's attempt to explain representation in terms of inference in *MIE* can be seen as an attempt to articulate the former notion.

¹⁴ *MIE*, ch. 4.

¹⁵ W.V.O Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), ch. 2.

¹⁶ Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), ch2.

¹⁷ See fn. 13.

between it and some state in the world, which it is thereby taken to represent. For example, the content of the VHS and Betamax tapes may be the same insofar as they record the data from the same security camera, and they may then be taken to represent the same events insofar as there is an isomorphism between this content and the relevant events. However, this suffers from the same problems with arbitrary mappings we discussed earlier, insofar as we can conjure up isomorphisms with other potentially stranger events or states. We might then suggest that this isomorphism is constrained by the causal origin of the relevant states. However, this would leave us saying that if the tapes were warped in precisely the same way by the same magnetic field, that they thereby represent that magnetic field. Sellars' solution to this problem is that the isomorphism must be more deeply tied into the functional role of the content bearing state.

In 'Being and Being Known', he illustrates this using the example of a robot that stores information on a similar magnetic tape, which he takes to picture its environment in virtue of an isomorphism between the state of the tape and the state of the environment. However, he also claims that:

This picturing cannot be abstracted from the mechanical and electronic processes in which the tape is caught up. The patterns on the tape do not picture the robot's environment merely by virtue of being patterns on the tape. In Wittgenstein's phrase, the 'method of projection' of the map involves the manner in which the patterns on the tape are added to, modified, and responded to by the other components of the robot. It is a map only by virtue of the physical *habitus* of the robot, i.e., by virtue of mechanical and electronic propensities which are rooted, ultimately, in its wiring diagram.¹⁸

To summarise, the constraints upon an isomorphism that allows us to produce a *representational mapping* between the states of two systems does not merely concern similarity of functional output, but a more complex relation of *projection* in which the state mediates between functionally specified inputs and outputs. For example, we can understand a variable state of the wiring diagram of a bee as representing the path to a source of nectar insofar as it varies appropriately when the bee discovers the source of nectar and produces the behaviour of returning to it with other bees. Moreover, the dance that the bee performs in order to direct other bees to that source represents the path insofar as its variations are appropriately correlated with the behaviour of travelling to it.¹⁹

So, for a state of our perceptual mechanisms to be non-conceptual and yet representational in this sense would be for it to play a functional role in a process of systematically guiding *behaviour* in relation to sensory input that is to some extent independent of any role played by conceptual content in guiding *action*, insofar as the latter is derivative upon the role of sentences in language-departure transitions in much the way that perception is derivative upon the role of sentences in language-entry transitions. The question is thus to what extent such states can play an active role in the move from sensation to conception (perception) without their role in the move from sensation to behaviour being mediated by conception. This is not a question I aim to

¹⁸ *BBK*, §40.

¹⁹ This example originates in Sellars (*SRLG*, §§14-15), but it, and the associated account of picturing, are developed in more detail by Ruth Millikan (*Language: A Biological Model* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) pp. 96-98).

completely resolve here.²⁰ However, I do take it to be plausible to assume that there are some such states, insofar as our perceptual capacities are not created out of whole cloth, but are built upon aspects of our psychology that we share with non-linguistic animals and pre-linguistic infants.

4. Universal and Parochial Content

Having distinguished between the non-representational, non-conceptual, and conceptual contents that states of our perceptual mechanisms can bare in terms of the functional roles of their components within these mechanisms, I now want to make a further distinction between types of content on this basis, and see how this distinction can shed some light on the myth of the categorial given. The distinction I want to draw is between what I'll call *parochial* and *universal* forms of content. The former covers all forms of content whose individuation is *dependent* upon functional mappings that are specified in terms of particular causal mechanisms, whereas the latter covers all forms of content whose individuation is entirely *independent* of any particular causal mechanism. We've already made this sort of distinction in considering the difference between contents individuated in terms of functional mappings and contents individuated in terms of pure isomorphisms. The characterisation of the latter is entirely mechanism independent, but ultimately cannot play a useful role in any causal explanation, psychological or otherwise, whereas the characterisation of the former, along with the representational mappings we have discussed depends upon the causal structure of the mechanisms in terms of which the output is specified.

However, it is important to see that although the conceptual content that results from perception is functionally individuated, it is nevertheless universal in the sense just defined. This is because the language games from which these functional roles are derived are intrinsically *extensible*. Though any given speaker's ability to perform language-entry transitions is tied to the structure of their own perceptual mechanisms, the concepts that they apply are not thereby indexed to those mechanisms. Although the process through which we challenge and justify observational reports concerns the proper functioning of the mechanisms that produce them, the assessment of this functioning is open to arguments about the causal relationship between the states observed and the system observing them. For example, arguments about colour observations are open to information about colour illusions that depend upon our theoretical grasp of how cone receptors interact with different wavelengths of light and the way the information they produce is integrated by the visual cortex. This same theoretical understanding of the causal relationship between colour and light has enabled us to incorporate new and more accurate measurement devices into our practices. The same applies with regard to concepts such as temperature, pressure, weight, and the like,

²⁰ This is one area in which Sellarsian work in philosophy of mind could be fruitfully crossbred with Heideggerian ideas, insofar as the latter's emphasis upon abilities to practically *cope* with one's environment that need not involve inference, but can nevertheless be interrupted and adjusted in accordance with it, provides a way of thinking about how such states might be involved in the mechanisms underlying our behavioural dispositions.

for which empirical science has enabled us to create superior means of observation and measurement, thereby bootstrapping our ability to apply empirical concepts on the back of our parochial perceptual mechanisms. In short, a concept that could only be applied in one way would not be an empirical concept, insofar as that concept is supposed to inferentially encode the causal regularities upon which the relevant perceptual mechanisms depend.²¹ It is thus entirely possible for speakers with entirely distinct causal economies to *non-inferentially* apply the same concept as long as their behaviour can be appropriately triangulated from within the game of giving and asking for reasons itself, insofar as the causal structure of any given perceptual mechanism is something amenable to analysis through *inference*.

Nevertheless, this extensibility and the universality it implies does not detract from the fact that our concepts are achievements of a distinct sort. The theoretical understanding of causal structure encoded in the inferential role of our empirical concepts is hard won. This inferential role is thus something that changes and grows as the scientific enterprise revises and refines our understanding.²² This point is crucial for making sense of Sellars' account of *categorical form*, and thereby the myth of the categorical given. Insofar as they are individuated in terms of functional role, concepts display relatively fixed forms of functional invariance in much the way that forms of functionally individuated content do. Just as form in general consists in more general functional roles that group other functional roles by means of these sorts of invariances, so categorical form consists in those more general functional roles common to specifically conceptual roles. For Sellars, *categories* are just concepts that classify other concepts in this way. The importance of recognising concepts as achievements is that it forces us to recognise a difference between categorical form that belong to our concepts *qua* concepts, and categorical form that belong to our concepts *qua* particular attempts to inferentially encode structure of the world. This produces a distinction between *logical categories* that remain invariant across the various revisions of our conceptual models of the world (e.g., singular term, predicate, quantifier, etc.) and *empirical categories* that uncover invariant features of these models that may nevertheless be revised along with them (e.g., physical object, occurrent property, process, etc.).

This puts us in a position to explain the myth of the categorical given and to account for its seductive character. I'll begin by quoting Sellars' succinct description of this form of the myth:

To reject the Myth of the Given is to reject the idea that the categorical structure of the world –if it has a categorical structure– imposes itself on the mind as a seal imposes an image on melted wax.²³

²¹ This connection between empirical concepts and causal modality is worked out in detail in Sellars' 'Concepts as Involving Laws and Inconceivable Without Them' (in *Philosophy of Science*, Oct. 1948, Vol. 15, pp. 287-313) and explored further by Brandom in *BSD*, ch. 4-6.

²² This raises questions about the degree of similarity of functional role required for sameness of conceptual content that must remain beyond the scope of the present paper, lest we be dragged into the debates about sameness of meaning that have raged in the philosophy of language at least since Quine's 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (*The Philosophical Review*, 1951, Vol. 60, pp. 20-43.) and the related debates about sameness of reference for theoretical terms between different theories that have followed them in the philosophy of science.

²³ Wilfrid Sellars, 'Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process: The Carus Lectures of Wilfrid Sellars', *The Monist*, Jan. 1981, Vol. 64, No. 1, pp. 3-90, Lecture I, §45. Hereafter *FMPP*.

The first thing to unpack here is the notion of the *categorical structure* of the world. This is the subject matter of traditional metaphysics, but for all of the competing sets of categories to be found in the tradition there is scant explanation of their function beyond ‘carving nature at its joints’.²⁴ For our purposes it is easiest to hold that it is whatever empirical categories *signify* by means of classifying empirical concepts. Importantly, this raises the question of whether categorical structure can be *pictured* by the non-conceptual forms of representation that we share with animals and pre-linguistic infants. To admit this would be to draw a parallel between the categorical form of our conceptual systems and what we might call the *phenomenological form* of the relevant representational mechanisms.

Leaving this to one side for the moment, I think we can reformulate the myth as follows: it consists in the idea that there is some form of *universal perceptual content* that is distinct from *empirical conceptual content* as Sellars describes it. This is just the claim that there is some specific sense in which absolutely any two sentient creatures could be said to have the same *experience* without having the same *conceptual grasp* of this experience. To put this in terms of our guiding metaphor, this amounts to treating ourselves as if we have TVs in our heads that have no particular causal-functional structure. It means supposing that there is a kind of content that is self-individuating insofar as it cannot in principle be individuated by means of a functional mapping between its vehicles. This is where the temptation to treat perceptual content as that which is available to introspection leads, insofar as it slides all too easily into treating introspection as in principle the only mode of access to content. It is treating introspection as *sui generis* in this manner leads to treating perceptual content as *sui generis* in its self-individuation. The illusion of self-individuation is maintained by illicitly individuating perceptual content on the basis of *what* we take it to represent (e.g., the pink ice cube we’re both looking at), rather than *how* it represents it (e.g., the functional role the relevant states play in a wider behavioural economy that incorporates the pink ice cube). This makes the posited content universal in the manner described above, but only insofar as it becomes parasitic upon the conceptual content of sentences we use to describe what it represents. It is on this basis that our ability to discriminate features of the phenomenological form of our perceptual mechanisms through introspective apprehension appears to us as unveiling a categorical structure that the world itself has impressed upon us.

What is distinctive about the categorical form of the myth of the given is that those who endorse it can insist that even if introspective reflection on the manner in which the world appears to us cannot provide us with epistemological foundations for specific claims about the world (the epistemic given), it can nevertheless play a more general epistemological role in organising the process of making claims about the world by delineating the categories we should use to organise our empirical concepts.²⁵ The problem with this is not so much that this sort of epistemological project is misguided.

²⁴ This is a metaphor with a long history, originating in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), §§265d-266a).

²⁵ Husserl’s phenomenological project and the role that the notion of categorical intuition plays within it is paradigmatic of this approach (cf. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Pure Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*. (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982)).

If nothing else, it is clear from Sellars' later work on process metaphysics that he took such work to be both possible and necessary.²⁶ The problem is the idea that studying the phenomenological form of our parochial perceptual mechanisms through any means has anything interesting to contribute to this task.

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²⁶ Cf. *FMPP*.